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As Teen Births Drop, Experts Are Asking Why

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IT LOOKED LIKE an uphill battle when the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy set a goal in 1996 of cutting the teen-pregnancy rate by one-third by 2005. Teens accounted for about one million pregnancies a year, most of them unplanned. And taxpayers were paying as much as $20 billion a year to financially support families started by girls 17 years old and younger.

Now, though, reducing teen pregnancies could turn into a rare public-health victory. This week's announcement by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention that the birth rate among girls between the ages of 10 and 14 has fallen to its lowest level in nearly 60 years is just the latest sign of success in the battle to curb teen pregnancy. The findings are similar to trends for teens overall—with pregnancies, abortions and birth rates all declining. Declines in birth rates have been particularly steep among African-Americans, plummeting 50% between 1991 and 2002 among black girls between the ages of 15 and 17.

Public health officials and other experts cite a number of possible reasons for the encouraging numbers, including better sex education, increased use of contraceptives and more public discussion about the risks of sex in the wake of the AIDS epidemic.

There also are signs that welfare reform may be encouraging teens to avoid starting families when they are very young.

Once confined to high schools, sex education is now taught in many middle schools, with some kids getting their first exposure to a class as early as the fifth grade.

"There's been a growing recognition that sex and pregnancy don't wait until high school," says Sarah Brown, director of the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, a nonprofit organization based in Washington.

Fay Menacker, a statistician with the CDC's National Center for Health Statistics and the report's lead author, notes that over the past decade many public and private programs have aimed at getting teenagers to focus on the importance of pregnancy prevention, including some emphasizing abstinence and "responsible behavior."

"These programs have been sending these messages at many levels," says Dr. Menacker. "It's possible the message is getting through."

Other pregnancy-prevention advocates suggest the drop in births to young teens may be due in part to a "copycat" effect, in which younger teens are modeling the more-responsible sexual behavior already documented among older teens. Birth rates for 18- and 19-year-old women have fallen by almost 18% between 1990 and 2002, according to the CDC.

A push to educate parents about the importance of "supervised time," including after-school programs for young teens, may also be having an impact, says Claire Brindis, director of the Center for Reproductive Health Research and Policy at the University of California, San Francisco.

"We're starting to work with parents about the risk that occurs during the transitional years, as these young girls and boys enter adolescence," says Ms. Brindis.

Scattered anecdotal reports of an increase in practice of oral sex, particularly among young teenage girls, have alarmed many parents, but prevention experts say there is no good national data tracking that activity.

The decline in birth rates among preteens and young teenage girls is a particularly welcome because many of those pregnancies resulted from unwanted sex with older men, according to pregnancy-prevention experts. The CDC report noted that the vast majority—97%—of births among 10 to 14 year olds occurred among 13 and 14 year olds. In 2002, for example, just 208 of the 7,315 births among young teens were to 10 to 12 year olds.

Still, it isn't entirely clear exactly which prevention efforts are most successful. The CDC findings are based on birth and death certificates, which don't include information about sexual behavior. And despite the improvement, the U.S. still has the highest rate of teen pregnancy in the industrialized world, with about 34% of teenage girls getting pregnant at least once before turning 20.

One potential flaw of the CDC data: comparing current birth rates to those of generations past may be somewhat misleading. Historical fertility and birth patterns among teens in the U.S. have been affected by many factors and actually peaked in the 1950s, when many women married and began families during their teenage years.

Overall, teen birth rates declined steadily, falling from 96.3 per 1,000 women in 1957 to about 50 in late 1980s, before edging higher for five years and then turning downward again. Births among younger teenagers also account for only a tiny fraction of all teenage pregnancies, according to government data. The U.S. still has the highest rate of teen pregnancy in the industrialized world, with about 34% of teenage girls getting pregnant at least once before turning 20.

The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy has been at the center of much of the push to lower teenage pregnancy and birth rates. Founded in 1996 by academics, politicians, corporate leaders, and health experts at the urging of President Clinton, the privately funded group has pushed the prevention message to virtually anyone who will listen. Its outreach efforts include training sex educators and advising Hollywood producers and scriptwriters.

While battles over whether teen pregnancy should be addressed through abstinence or easier access to contraception have often stalled efforts, the Washington group has collaborated with all sides, including Planned Parenthood and the Best Friends foundation, a group that promotes abstinence. Its work has involved helping run a workshop on contraception, and a training session for abstinence educators.

"We said the only thing we all have to agree on is that we want the rate of teen pregnancy to go down, and the only thing unacceptable is to do nothing," says Ms. Brown.

Going forward, the CDC report is likely to fuel further debate over what types of pregnancy-prevention programs —those emphasizing abstinence, or contraception—are most valuable. Dr. Brindis cautions that although programs that teach "abstinence only" have become increasingly popular in some states, there is concern that while teens may delay sex for a while in response to such exhortations, they may be less likely to use contraception when they do become active.

Other experts stress that the encouraging trend cited in the CDC report may not be sustainable without comprehensive efforts.